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**MANY DIVERSITIES FOR MANY CUSTOMERS:
CONTEXTUALIZING DIVERSITY (MANAGEMENT)
IN FOUR SERVICE COMPANIES**

by
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Many diversities for many customers:

Contextualizing diversity (management) in four service companies

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Abstract

This study examines how different understandings of diversity and diversity management are produced in four service organizations' interactions with their customers. For a hospital, a call centre, a technical drawing company and a logistical company, we analyze how two key dimensions of organization-customer interactions, –customers' proximity versus invisibility and standardized versus diversified service– affect the way diversity and diversity management are understood. We show how specific combinations of these two dimensions determine which personnel's differences become organizationally relevant and whether they are positively (as a contribution) or negatively (as an obstacle) constructed. We subsequently discuss how these understandings of diversity affect the organizations' way of managing differences. Finally, taking a more explicitly critical perspective, we classify the four approaches to diversity (management) into 'strong' and 'mixed' ones and assess the degree to which customers represent a constraint or a potential for diverse personnel to challenge existing power relations.

Introduction

Diversity studies generally define diversity by referring to one or more employees' demographic traits such as gender, race, ethnicity, and age, and examine subsequently the effects of these differences onto a variety of organizational practices and outcomes (see Milliken & Martins, 1996 for a review). In recent years, however, a few diversity scholars have increasingly expressed dissatisfaction with this kind of approach. The major point of critique is that, while focusing on the effects of diversity, research has left the notion of diversity itself undertheorized (Nkomo & Cox, 1996). The unproblematic use of demographic traits as independent variables to operationalize diversity has *de facto* led to an understanding of diversity as a given, fixed individual or group essence (Litvin, 1997). The anchoring of diversity within the individual or the group bears two major related consequences, further limiting the current understanding of diversity. First, it defines diversity independently of the specific context under study, obscuring the active role organizations play in the production of

specific understandings of diversity (Ely, 1995; Foldy, 2002). Second, by so doing, it conceals how specific understandings of diversity reflect organizational power relations (Zanoni & Janssens, 2004).

The present paper intends to make a contribution towards a re-conceptualization of diversity through the concept of customer. Starting from the idea that the customer is an organizational insider (du Gay, 1996; du Gay & Salaman, 1992), we examine how the interaction between the organization and its customers produces specific understandings of diversity. We argue that different types of interactions with customers shape the work processes and consequently define what kinds of differences become organizationally relevant. Such a re-conceptualization of diversity considers diversity as a social product within a particular organizational contexts and thus reflecting organizational power relations.

To develop this argument, we rely on empirical material collected in four service companies: a hospital, a call centre, a technical drawing company, and a logistical company. In the case analyses, we identify two dimensions that characterize the customer-organization interaction: customers' proximity versus invisibility and standardized versus diversified customers' services. The intersection of these two dimensions presents us four types of customer interactions corresponding to our four cases. Given this bi-dimensional conceptualization of customer, we link concrete customers to the meanings of diversity and diversity management in each of the four service companies. We discuss how an *ad hoc* understanding of diversity is constructed to fit the organization core service-production and how such understanding lies at the basis of the organization's specific diversity management.

The case studies were conducted during the period 2001-2002 as part of a research project on diversity management in Flemish organizations financed by the Flemish government in Belgium. All four organizations were known to employ 'diverse' employees and actively involved in managing their diverse workforce. In each organization, open-ended interviews were conducted with 8 to 14 persons in different hierarchical positions. In each case, half of the interviewees were seen as 'diverse' personnel members.

The text is structured inductively. In part one, we briefly present the four service companies focusing on their activity, personnel demographic composition, and diversity policy. In part two, we argue the relevance of the customer in understanding diversity and identify two customer dimensions that allow distinguishing four types of

organization-customer interactions. In part three, we analyse, for each case, how the specific type of customer interaction determines which differences become organizationally relevant. We further use the two dimensions of organization-customer interaction to contextualize the meanings of diversity and diversity management. Finally, in part four, we develop theoretical reflections on the way different customer interactions present constraints as well as potential to change existing organizational power relations.

Four cases of diversity

The hospital

The first case study is a medium-sized hospital located in a central urban area with large Chassidic Jewish, Turkish and North African communities. Next to Flemish patients, the hospital has been serving the Jewish community since its origins in 1874 and increasingly, in the last 10 years, the Turkish and North African ones. In 1999, as a response to the demographic diversification of patients and a shortage in nursing staff, the hospital management decided to take two measures. First, they split the more 'technical' nursing tasks from the more 'logistical' ones such as making beds, serving meals, and cleaning materials— leaving the former to nurses and creating the new (lower) professional profile of 'health assistant' for the latter. Second, they hired a number of women with a Turkish and Moroccan background without nursing education as health assistants. While there are a few nurses with different cultural backgrounds, one (male) doctor, and some administrative staff members, the majority of culturally diverse employees are health assistants.

The recruitment of personnel with diverse cultural backgrounds, 'matching' those of patients, is one of the ways in which the hospital has been trying to better understand patients' needs in order to serve them in a culturally appropriate way. These diverse employees have the right cultural knowledge about the type of care that is expected and act as translators when patients do not speak Dutch. Additional initiatives that have been taken to accommodate the care to patients' needs are offering a wide selection of food, placing patients with similar cultural backgrounds in the same room, and allowing special treatment during religious holidays. The hospital has further included an anti-discrimination clause in the hospital bylaw and has an

ombudsperson who handles possible conflicts. Finally, in order to increase the cultural sensitivity of the Flemish employees, the hospital has started a multicultural workgroup whose aim is to provide more information about the different cultures of the patients who enter the organization. Their activities include information sessions about rituals of birth and death in different cultures, intercultural communication trainings, visits to the Jewish and Turkish neighbourhoods, and a multicultural calendar with all religious holidays.

To conclude, in this organization, diversity is mainly understood in terms of cultural, linguistic and religious differences between different individuals who are members of specific communities. These communities cross the organization-customer boundary as they belong to both the patients and employees' groups. Their culture forms the focus of the diversity initiatives implemented by the organization.

The call centre

The call centre is a young company, founded in 1998. It grew out of a business centre set up by a socio-economic development project to stimulate the revival of a rather underprivileged area with high unemployment. The call centre offers consultancy in marketing activities such as telemarketing and telephone market research in a variety of European languages including Dutch, French, English, German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Rumanian, and Polish. In the four years between its foundation and the data collection, the company had grown from 20 to 60 permanent employees including 51 operators, 3 supervisors, and 6 support staff and management. A majority of the operators and one of the supervisors are immigrants from different countries, including some political refugees, mainly lower educated.

The employment of a heterogeneous workforce is a deliberate management choice. It has a business purpose, allowing the organization to position itself as a young, dynamic and flexible company with well-trained native-speaking operators able to serve customers in their native languages. At the same time, the call centre has a social purpose, aiming to employ persons whose chances on the labour market are low. Taking into account their skills, management consistently select those candidates whose need to work is highest such as single mothers, political refugees, or older unskilled people. In turn, this policy positively affects business because it creates well-motivated operators who are eager to work and provide good service.

Management has a well-thought policy to manage its heterogeneous workforce, although without emphasizing the differences among employees. They employ soft-HRM practices which they term 'employee care.' This care starts with the office layout, which, differently from most call centres, is not in battery but offers spaces for breaks and relaxation. It is further integrated in their evaluation approach. For instance, newcomers work a few days without monitoring and evaluation, giving them the time to adjust and learn. When evaluations are given, employees perceive them as constructive feedback emphasizing positive elements and selecting one aspect for improvement. Another practice is their flexibility policy. Employees' personal and family situation is taken into consideration when deciding employees' working hours on projects. Finally, management attempts to create an open, amiable atmosphere favouring positive personal and inter-group relations. By assigning both Dutch- and French-speaking employees to the same project, it deliberately limits linguistic segregation. While official documents need to be in Dutch to comply with the Flemish language legislation, French translations are always provided. And management takes every opportunity to organize and fund social, intercultural events for personnel.

To conclude, this organization is characterized by a heterogeneous workforce whose native languages are crucial in serving international customers and whose low chances on the labour market makes them dedicated employees. They are managed through a policy in which caring relationships are crucial with emphasis on the individual without stigmatising his/her difference.

The technical drawing company

The technical drawing company is a young engineering company, started in 1991, with various branches in Belgium. It offers services for the design and set up of machines and industrial installations such as automatization, product development, and CAD consultancy. Due to the deficit of qualified technical drawers in the late 1990s, this company started hiring a small number of female drawers, physically disabled male drawers who received their education in a specialized training agency, and lower educated male drawers who gained their skills through adult education programmes subsidized by the government. According to management, as all other employees, they were all selected for their capabilities and motivation. While the lack of qualified personnel was the main motivation to hire these personnel, the company does receive subsidies to employ physically disabled persons (30% of their salary).

Employees at this technical drawing agency mainly work at clients' sites, sometimes for several months. Whenever a new project starts, the client is always informed about the specific situation of the individual drawer and alternative work arrangements are always jointly decided. For instance, part-time work, generally for female drawers, is always agreed on a project basis and needs thus to be periodically renegotiated. Or, the company and the client decide together how a physically disabled drawer can be best employed. In case of mobility problems, he carools with colleagues to the client's site. In case of task-related difficulties such as taking measurements involving climbing ladders, a colleague accompanies him to assist or to carry out the task. Or, whenever possible, tasks are carried out at the drawing company's office rather than at the client's site. Once these adjustments are agreed upon, no additional special treatment is given, rather, the same expectations hold for all personnel.

Clients play a central role in the technical drawing agency's HRM activities. For instance, their demands drive the content and timing of training and development activities. They also provide input into employees' performance appraisals through a first feedback interview at the client's site between client, employee and manager. This input represents the main ground on which salary increases are negotiated between the employee and his/her manager. While some employees explicitly appreciate this practice, others mention one's lack of negotiation skills or limited mobility and flexibility as causes of lagging behind in terms of salary.

To conclude, diversity in this technical drawing company refers above all to physical disability and gender. These demographical differences however are not positively related to the nature of the provided service. To manage them, the company employs its employees on an individual basis for specific projects. Flexible arrangements are always decided on in agreement with clients who are also involved in performance evaluations.

The logistical company

The logistical company, our last case study, positions itself as a business partner for international companies who decide to outsource logistical operations. It focuses on distribution services of high-tech and consumer products throughout Europe. In profiling itself towards customers, the company stresses its flexibility. This includes, for instance, making new deliveries as fast as scheduled ones and guaranteeing a

minimum working hours' availability for overseas customers located in different time zones. To be flexible, next to its permanent staff, the company employs 30 to 170 temporary storehouse workers in peak periods. Moreover, according to needs, it out-sources activities to a sheltered workplace, employing an average of 100 light mentally handicapped persons. Temporary workers carry out de-skilled, routine jobs like packaging and ticketing.

Due to its growth in the last years, the company's permanent personnel increased from 192 to 252. Most of the newly hired employees started on a temporary contract and were permanently hired after good performance evaluations. Because of labour shortage during the time of growth, the majority of them were lower educated, migrant workers, often female. They were selected on the basis of their performance and their potential to work autonomously and take initiative. These latter skills are important competences in the less conjuncture-bound jobs of order picking and controlling, only performed by permanent employees. Other criteria that the company uses are: a basic knowledge of spoken Dutch, teamwork orientation, meeting quality standards, and behavioural norms such as coming on time, respecting the smoking prohibition, not using cellular phones, and respect for materials.

In managing its personnel, the logistical company employs traditional HRM activities with attention to flexibility and a comfortable working environment. To compensate the low salaries in the distribution industry, the company offers flexibility in terms of working hours or vacation depending on employees' personal situation. On a very short notice, employees can adjust their working hours or take a day off. Further, management has taken several initiatives to create a good working environment, foster personal relationships and decrease hierarchical distance between personnel. For instance, buildings have been renovated, sandwiches are sold at reduced prices, and social outside-work activities such as barbecues or soccer are organized.

To conclude, in this logistic company, diversity almost disappears from the picture. While personnel is diverse in terms of culture, gender, and education, they are expected to perform their work just as any other employee. There is also no explicit diversity policy in place, but rather only general HRM practices that aim to compensate for the low salary through offering flexibility and a good working environment.

Bringing multiple constructions of customers into diversity

Today, customer relations play a central role in shaping work processes. With the advanced economies' specialization towards the service sector and increased competition due to deregulation, the customer has made his appearance in all branches of management deeply affecting the very way organizations are run. The customer has become an organizational insider, increasingly defining 'the rules of the game.' It is due to his new, central role in organizations, that the customer represents a key resource to theorize diversity in a more contextual way. In other words, we hold that, if specific meanings of diversity depend on their embeddedness in specific organizational contexts and the customer is central to these latter, diversity can be understood through examining the specific ways in which the customer enters organizations and structures work process.

To date, the diversity literature has been cursory in referencing the customer. It is mainly practitioners' texts that argue that organizations should recruit and manage diverse personnel to face the increased diversity among customers (Cox, 1991; Thomas & Ely, 1996). Here, the assumption is that diverse human resources provide the organization with insights to better understand and communicate with its diverse customers and meet their specific needs. However, this rationale for the 'business case' of diversity has neither been properly theorized nor empirically tested.

Organization studies provide more in-depth analyses of the customer. They range from the customer as an organizing principle, a rationale for new strategy, organizational structures and management accounting (Gutek & Welsh, 2000; Schneider & Bowen, 1995) to more critical perspectives considering the customer a hegemonic managerial discourse and therefore an additional means of employee subjugation (Knights & Morgan, 1993; Sturdy, Grugulis & Willmott, 2001). Common to most studies, however, is their tendency to conceptualize the customer in an abstract way. On the contrary, in this study, we focus on how concrete customers enter the organization through the service interaction. By doing so, they redefine work practices through which specific understandings of diversity come into being.

To circumscribe our understanding of the 'customer' (cf. Rosenthal, Peccei & Hill, 2001), we focus on two fundamental dimensions of the organization-customer interaction. The first dimension refers to the mode of delivery of the service, in particular, the physical distance between the organization's employees and its

customers. The second dimension rather refers to the way the provided service is discursively constructed by the organization as standardized or diversified.

The first dimension, proximity versus invisibility, indicates whether the service is delivered through a physical encounter between employees and customers. Although in the everyday service practices, the physical and the metaphorical customer cannot be separated, we argue that this analytical distinction helps us better understand the extent to and the modalities in which the customer co-defines organization-specific understandings of service work and, through this latter, diversity. In cases where employees and customers physically interact, sometimes over long periods of time, the embodied (and emotional) dimension of the interaction is crucial. It points to the performative nature of the service (Lewis, 1989; Johns, 1999; Farrell, Souchon & Durden, 2001), and reflects, as such, power relations between customers, employees, and employers (Hancock & Tyler, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). The physical element is at the same time crucial to understand diversity. Diversity has a strong embodied, aesthetic dimension, because it is often related to a perceived 'visible' or 'hearable' difference (Zanoni & Janssens, 2004). The diversity literature acknowledges this by commonly distinguishing between observable and non-observable differences (Milliken & Martins, 1996).

Our second dimension, standardized versus diversified, refers to the extent to which the work processes aim to serve general business demands versus specialized customers' demands. We define a standardized service as one that, while meeting individual needs of the customer, is produced and evaluated according to standards of quality, cost and flexibility that are applicable in the particular business branch. For instance, the technical drawing company designs a machine to produce a certain type of goods according to the technical specifications required by the customer. A diversified service, on the other hand, is produced and delivered to meet, next to the standardized ones, additional specific needs. This is the case of the hospital, where all care practices are affected by general principles of quality, cost and flexibility but also by patients' and employees' cultural, religious and linguistic norms. While the distinction between these two types of services is discursively constructed, a matter of how the organization –and the industry as a whole– conceptualizes the service, such construction is nonetheless 'real' and has very 'material' consequences. As our analysis will show, organizational understandings of diversity are greatly affected by

such constructions, because the 'difference' is positioned either at the core of the diversified service or as an obstacle to deliver the standardized service.

Customer interactions affect diversity (management): Analyzing the four service companies

Analyzing the four service companies, we first relate the type of customer interactions to the kinds of difference that are organizationally relevant. We then discuss how such interactions, being the core of the service work, affect the contextual meanings attributed to diversity and diversity management. Figure 1 below classifies each of our four service companies according to the two dimensions of the organization-customer interaction.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Organizationally relevant differences in interactions with customers

The hospital

The hospital is an organization characterized by customers' proximity and culturally diversified services. While health care work is typically considered to be an example of 'front-line work,' we stress here the relevance of the customers' physical presence in the hospital and the close, embodied interaction in which they engage with doctors and nurses. Providing health care service involves not only communication but also physical contact between employees and patients. This close co-presence delivers far more context than any other form of human exchange (Boden & Molotch, 1994) making customer service a very 'embodied' service. At the same time, the hospital is confronted with patients coming from diverse cultural communities, with different food habits, languages, and rules about the body. As expressed by the head of nursing, the patients' culturally differentiated needs require a diversified embodied service:

'A man cannot take care of a Jewish woman, this is very clear. When I was doing my internship, I didn't know, so they showed me the door... more than once. It has to do with their religion. With Moroccans, it rather has to do with the man/woman relationship. A man cannot take care of a woman, sometimes even a girl older than 10 or in her puberty. Not always, it has to do with how strict they are, how Westernized... [...] If a woman wants to give birth crouched, then we say to the gynaecologist: 'Sorry, but you'll have to go on your knees. And most of them do it...' (Head of nursing)

Considering this type of organization-customer relationship, the personnel's differences that become organizationally relevant are the ones that reflect the patients' cultural differences. As the case indicates, the 'diverse' employees come from the same cultural background as the patients. Through their cultural and linguistic knowledge, they assist in providing the embodied service which is culturally appropriate to the patients. Employed as health assistants, they act as translators and provide emotional support to the patients. Other types of differences such as gender – all health assistants are female – are in this case organizationally irrelevant. This irrelevance probably occurs because the gender difference fits the dominant image of nursing staff being female. Diversity in this organizational context therefore refers to the linguistic and cultural differences that are essential to providing the embodied care as requested by the customer. Because migrant health assistants inherently possess these skills, they are brought into the organization.

The call centre

The call centre's customers are not physically present during the service delivery, but interact with employees through the telephone. However, as in the hospital, the provided services are diversified. The call centre's employees speak different languages so that customers are assisted in their own native languages. The following excerpt illustrates the centrality of language in providing a good service:

'Sometimes there are errors in the database and I get a French-speaking person on the line. Then I just say 'excusez-moi, je vais vous passer mon collègue francophone'. Then I transfer the person to the French-speaking operator in the room. Sometimes I just switch to the other language. You are not expected to speak English or French, but if you do, that's even better. I am also fluent in Polish, so, if I get somebody on the line and I hear that his native language is Polish, and then I switch to Polish. Then you get a good evaluation of course.'

(Operator)

In the context of the call centre, employees' linguistic difference becomes organizationally relevant. The diversified service is possible because of the linguistic diversity among operators, mostly migrants and political refugees, matching customers' linguistic diversity. At the same time, the virtual nature of customers' contacts renders bodily differences to be organizationally irrelevant. As one operator pointed out, the call centre employs many persons who are overweight and one disfigured person. Because the customer is invisible, such 'aesthetic differences' become irrelevant, as they do not hamper the provision of the service. The relevant

differences are native languages as they directly contribute to the diversified customer's service. Similar to the hospital, migrant employees are employed because of their skills which are necessary to providing the service.

The technical drawing company

The technical drawing company is an organization characterized by customers' proximity and standardized services. As in the hospital, employees work in close contact with clients, often working at these latter's sites for long periods of time. Different however from the two organizations above, this organization offers standardized services that customers evaluate according to 'general' business standards such as quality, cost and flexibility. Due to the shortage of (able male) technical drawers, it employs several women and physically disabled men. Their employment may involve some problems:

'Before we send an employee to a client, we clearly say to the client: this person... this and that. We had somebody who had undergone an amputation and missed half of one leg. He had to go to a factory to take some measurements, which meant going up ladders. Then we said to the client: that person cannot do it, but he is a good drawer. In the end, they decided to take him. But then they know in advance what the limitations are.' (Manager)

This fragment illustrates how these employees' difference presents extra limitations in the service interaction, which need to be compensated by superior technical skills. In this organization, differences in gender and physical ability are clearly only organizationally relevant in as far as they negatively affect the delivery of standardized services. The technical drawing agency rather stresses individual technical skills. Because of the customer's proximity, the customer is involved in deciding how much gender and physical ability differences can be tolerated in the service interaction.

The logistical company

Similar to the technical drawing agency, the logistical company offers standardized services that have to meet general quality, cost and flexibility standards. However, in this case the customer is invisible. The organization particularly stresses its flexibility, assured through the employment of temporary workers in peak periods. Due to the company's growth in times of labour shortage, several temporary workers –low educated persons, often female migrants– were permanently hired:

‘We had to hire diverse personnel, but we also have to hold onto our own strengths, our identity and our flexibility. Whether this happens with white employees or with foreigners, it doesn’t matter. If you streamline the processes, if you introduce better quality control, certain jobs can be done by less qualified workers, if they stick to the rules.’ (HR manager)

In this case, as in the technical drawing agency, the demographical differences in gender and race are not considered to be organizationally relevant. The structured work process and the de-skilled nature of the work limit the way in which these differences can form a problem. They are made innocuous by employees’ compliance and flexible availability so that invisible customers’ expectations of timely services can be met.

The contextualized meaning of diversity through customers

The two customer interaction dimensions not only help us to identify which types of demographic differences become organizationally relevant and why, but they also provide insights in how these different organizational logics towards difference lead to different meanings of diversity. In Table 1, we summarize each organization’s understanding of diversity.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

When the organization provides diversified services, as in the hospital and the call centre, diverse personnel are brought in because of their difference. These differences are valued because they represent skills which directly contribute to the attainment of organizational goals. In the hospital, the personnel’s cultural and linguistic difference becomes an organizational asset enabling them to give embodied care in a culturally appropriate manner. In the call centre, differences contribute to providing linguistically diversified communication.

When the organization provides standardized services, as in the technical drawing and logistical company, we first notice that diverse employees have been hired to solve general recruitment problems. Because of labour shortage, they receive an employment opportunity. Second, they do not contribute to the attainment of organizational goals thanks to their differences; but rather, they do so in spite of them. In the technical drawing company, the employees’ bodily and gender differences represent an extra obstacle in the interaction with the customer that has to be overcome by superior technical skills and motivation. In the logistical company,

employees' cultural, linguistic, educational and gender differences remain within the organization and are compensated through their flexible availability, compliance and low cost. In both cases, diversity detracts from the service and employees' demographic differences therefore need to be compensated.

Customers' proximity versus invisibility also affects the way organizations understand diversity. When customers are physically close, they co-determine the types and the degree of difference that enters the organization. In the case of the hospital, the customer co-determines which differences are allowed –e.g. personnel having the same cultural background as patients are better able to provide culturally appropriate service. In the technical drawing agency, the customer co-determines the acceptable degree of those differences that can potentially hamper the service. In both cases, the customers represent constraints for the organization but, depending on their need for diversified or standardized service, they either co-determine the type of differences or the degree thereof.

When customers are invisible, they pose less of a constraint onto the organizations, which have more freedom to employ diversity that is not directly linked to the service. In the case of the call centre, the organization determines which other types of differences can be present. For instance, as invisible customers do not impose aesthetic criteria, diverse personnel can be disfigured or obese. In the logistical company, management autonomously decides on the acceptable degree of difference. Migrant women are welcome as long as they are flexible and compliant workers.

The contextualized meaning of diversity management through customers

Our two customers' dimensions do not only clarify how demographic differences become meaningful and what each organization understands as diversity, but also help place their specific diversity management approaches (see Table 2). As before described in the cases, these four service companies manage their diverse workforce in quite different ways.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

When the organization provides diversified customer services, management practices acknowledge and even stress difference. In the hospital, explicit initiatives are implemented to recruit diverse personnel and increase employees' awareness about the differences among cultural groups. In the call centre, soft HRM practices are

in place which address employees' individual differences. The perspectives are however not completely alike: the hospital approaches differences as a set of characteristics and rules of groups while the call centre sees them in a more open-ended, individual manner. This is doubtless related to the presence, in the hospital, of patients and employees that are conceived in the first place as members of specific cultural communities. The far, scattered and heterogeneous customers of the call centre can hardly be thought as communities, affecting the way differences among operators are conceptualized. At the same time, the stress on the individual rather than groups allows building a shared organizational identity through social activities.

When the organization provides standardized services, differences are dealt with through general HRM activities rather than an autonomous diversity policy. Such HRM is centred on a meritocracy –the same standards apply for all employees– complemented by ad-hoc solutions to accommodate individual differences. In the technical drawing agency, management takes into account individual constraints when organizing and dividing project work. However, once the project has started, they expect the same level of high performance from all employees. In the logistical company, the work processes determine the standards, applicable for everybody. However, there is great flexibility in individual working hours.

Customers' proximity versus invisibility also contributes to shaping these organizations' diversity management approaches. When customers are physically co-present, they strongly influence the diversity policy. This policy is integrated within the company's customer relations' strategy, taking an external orientation. In the hospital, the embodied interaction, reinforced by the diversified nature of the service, contributes to making the customer the central actor in the definition of diversity management. The cultural and linguistic background of specific groups of patients determines the job splitting and recruitment policy as well as the specific content of those initiatives that aim to increase personnel's cultural awareness and knowledge. In the technical drawing company, where the service is standardized, close clients enter the organization's diversity management through their eminent role in HRM decisions regarding training, work organization, promotion and salary.

When customers are invisible, they pose fewer constraints and the organization's diversity approach takes an internal orientation. Common to the call centre and the logistical company is their emphasis on establishing good interpersonal relationships between employees and supervisors. They offer flexibility taking into account

employees' personal situation and organize social activities. Because differences play opposite roles in the delivered service, however, the two approaches are not completely alike. In the call centre, where differences contribute to the service, they are valued and celebrated through intercultural activities. In the logistical company, where differences need to be compensated, the stress is on equal rules and personnel are invited to typically 'Belgian' social activities.

Conclusion

In this analysis, we have shown that organization-customer interactions, in terms of customers' proximity-invisibility and standardized-diversified service, affect which differences become organizationally relevant, and shape the specific meanings organizations attribute to diversity as well as their diversity management initiatives. Within each organization, the analysis points to a strong coherence between these three aspects, leading to four distinct approaches: diversity (management) is above all 'marketable' in the hospital, 'beautiful' in the call centre, 'negotiable' in the technical drawing company, and 'affordable' in the logistical company.

Re-configuring power relations within diversity (management): The customer as constraint and potential

The analysis of our empirical material has shown how customer interactions shape diversity (management) in the four service companies under study. The resulting four approaches point to its context-specific, constructed nature. In this concluding part, taking a more critical perspective, we reflect on how these four different approaches configure power relations between employers, employees and customers and in how far the customer represents a constraint and/or a potential for diverse personnel to challenge them. While we recognize that diverse employees –both in our four cases and in the Western labour markets as a whole– generally perform lower paid jobs, we believe that their power is not exclusively determined by their position in the organizational hierarchy. Workers are always also agents, not only embedded in specific power relations, but also actively reproducing or challenging them. Because management's power onto diverse personnel manifests itself in the first place through the definition of these latter's identity (Zanoni & Janssens, 2004), the availability of

spaces where diverse personnel can participate in such definition is central to their ability to change existing power relations.

Based on the analysis conducted in part three, we distinguish two 'strong' and two 'mixed' approaches to diversity (management) and argue that the latter create more room for diverse employees to actively participate in defining who they are in the organization and, potentially, even beyond.

The double constraint of customer interactions in 'strong' approaches to diversity (management)

The hospital and the logistical company are two examples of strong approaches, where the two dimensions of customer interaction reinforce each other. The combinations of diversified services and close customers –in the hospital– and of standardized services and invisible customers –in the logistical company– both produce strong, coherent organizational understandings of diversity (management). However, while in the former the stress is put on *difference*, in the latter it is on *sameness* (cf. Liff & Wajcman, 1996). In both cases, such strong approaches leave only small interstices where diverse employees can challenge existing power relations.

In the hospital, the emphasis on group differences among customers as well as employees and on the normative aspects of their culture, over-defines difference, producing an essentialistic, stereotypical understanding of diversity that lends itself to marketing. Diverse employees are constrained within specific cultural scripts and the low hierarchical positions in the organization. They are limited by convergent 'repressive' and 'productive' relations of power with management *and* customers, where 'repressive' relations of power are those that act from the outside onto the self and 'productive' ones are those that act through the self's production of identity (du Gay, 1996; Foucault, 1977; 1979; McCabe, 2000).

In the logistical company, the opposite combination of standardized services and invisible customers also overlap to doubly constrain diverse personnel. Here, difference is constructed as 'incidental' –invisible for the customer and not directly related to the service– and the stress is on general rules of behavior. Difference is constructed as irrelevant although it is precisely because of their difference that these employees have fewer opportunities on the labour market and are therefore available, flexible and affordable.

In these two cases, the only possible interstices for challenging existing power relations are situated at the points of tension which inevitably emerge because of the organizations' exclusive stress on either difference (diversity management) or sameness (HRM). Examples of potential points of tension are, in the hospital, the non-correspondence between health assistants' additional task of translating and their job description and salary, and, in the logistical company, the sustainability of a flexibility policy that has to conciliate both employees' and the employers' needs.

The constraint and potential of customer interactions in 'mixed' approaches to diversity (management)

The call centre and the technical drawing agency are two examples of mixed approaches to diversity (management). The combinations of diversified service and invisible customers in the former, and of standardized service and close customers in the latter produce nuanced approaches to diversity (management), holding more potential for diverse employees' agency to question existing organizational power relationships.

In the call centre, the diversified service stresses personnel's linguistic differences. However, the invisibility of customers makes it possible for the organization to develop an inclusive approach that sees difference as an 'existential' condition of each employee. Such approach creates a counterbalancing sense of sameness, which is in line with the company's policy of promoting a strong shared organizational identity. In other words, there appears to be an organizational space where diverse employees can actively define their differences, and even celebrate them, without necessarily having to fit into stereotypes that are made available to them.

In the technical drawing agency, the standardized nature of the services points to all employees' sameness, reflected in a HRM-centred approach to diversity (management). Nonetheless, because clients are close, they play a central role in producing an individual, negotiated understanding of difference. Such configuration of power relations offers some room for employees' active challenging existing power relations. Although difference represents an additional difficulty in the customer interaction, the clients' pragmatic involvement in organizing the work and finding ad hoc solutions aims at making difference negotiable and therefore more acceptable for all stakeholders. Moreover, because clients are third parties in the employment relation, their positive evaluation can occasionally be used to support employees'

claims for individual promotion and salary increases. In this case, clients' proximity and the standardized nature of the services clearly represent at once constraints and potential for diverse personnel's expression of agency in challenging existing power relations.

In these two organizations, organizational practices create some room for employees to exert their power. Depending on the specific situation, employees take part in shaping power relations by co-defining their identity as different and/or same, and use shifting alliances –with customers against the employer or with the employer against customers– to define themselves in a way that can positively affect their material conditions of work.

Conclusion

This study clearly indicated that the relationship between an organization and its customers has a strong impact on the way diversity is understood and managed in specific organizational contexts. Customer interactions make particular differences organizationally relevant and produce specific understandings of diversity as well as specific approaches to diversity management. Such specific ways to understand and manage diversity are at once reflections of organizational configurations of power – between the employer, (diverse) personnel, and customers– and means through which those power relations can be challenged.

On the positive side, we see that increasingly diverse customer markets and labour shortages create new employment opportunities for a more diverse labour force, whose presence in organizations stimulates new working arrangements and organizational practices. However, these arrangements and practices can become truly emancipatory only if diverse employees are allowed and/or actively take the space to engage in defining who they are in the organization and, by doing so, re-configure power relations to obtain more advantageous material conditions of work.

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Figure 1: Typologies of customer interactions

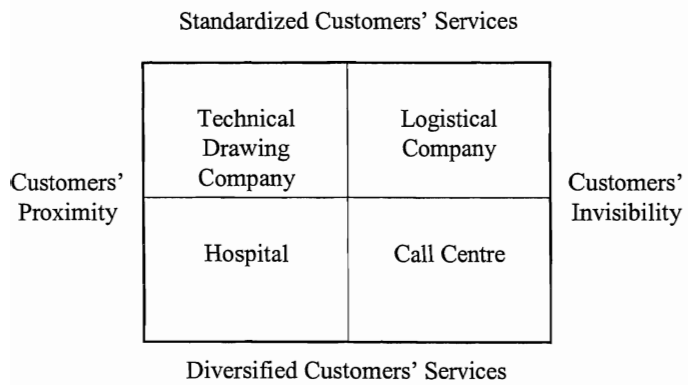


Table 1: The contextualized meaning of diversity in four service companies

Diversity		The Hospital	The Call Centre	The Technical Drawing Company	The Logistical Company
Demographical Differences		Migrant employees from same culture as patients	Migrants and political refugees	Physically disabled and female drawers	Low educated persons, often female migrants
Organizational Meaning of Differences	Influence of diversified versus standardized customers' services	Linguistic and cultural differences contribute to providing diversified 'embodied care'	Linguistic differences contribute to providing diversified 'communication'	Bodily and gender differences are compensated through technical skills and motivation	Cultural, linguistic, educational, and gender differences are compensated through low cost and compliance
	Influence of customers' proximity versus invisibility	Close customer co-determines which diversity needs to enter the organization	Invisible customer leaves to the organization which diversity can enter the organization	Close customer co-determines to what extent diversity is acceptable	Invisible customer leaves to the organization to what extent diversity is acceptable

Table 2: The contextualized meaning of diversity management in four service companies

Diversity Management		The Hospital	The Call Centre	The Technical Drawing Company	The Logistical Company
Practices and Policies		Explicit diversity practices towards recruitment of diverse personnel and increasing cultural sensitivity	Soft HRM through organizational culture and individualized flexibility practices	Traditional meritocracy centred around clients' evaluations	Traditional HRM with attention to individual working hours flexibility and work environment
Organizational Meaning of Managing Differences	Influence of diversified versus standardized customers' services	Specific cultural and linguistic group differences are stressed	Specific cultural and linguistic individual differences are acknowledged and all differences are celebrated	The same standards apply for all employees; individual differences are addressed ad-hoc	The same standards apply for all employees; flexibility in individual work arrangements
	Influence of customers' proximity versus invisibility	External orientation: close, diverse patients strongly influence the content of the internal diversity policy	Internal orientation: invisible customer allows a focus on strong organizational identity that counterbalances all individual differences	External orientation: close customers strongly influence decisions concerning work organization, promotion and salary	Internal orientation: invisible customer allows a focus on HR management and internal relationships